

Growing Beyond A Loss: Reassigning Tasks, Reassessing Workflows, and Carrying on after an Employee Death

Scenario: Within the interval of three months in 2019, the Miami University Libraries had to respond to the unexpected deaths of several library employees.

- **Employee #1 (Special Collections)** passed away in the hospital within 10 days of a cancer diagnosis.
- **Employee #2 (Circulation)**, who normally opened the largest of our branch libraries, passed away on her way home from work.

The Access Services Librarian and the Dean of Libraries were both out of town at conferences at the time of the death of Employee #2.

Initial Response:

- **Family members notified the Libraries**
- **Supervisory chain were notified**
- **Substitutes for were worked out for the Circulation Desk Employee.**
- **Employees were notified by email** – but only at the main campus. Employee #2 had previously worked in a library on the regional campus.
- **Students employees were notified** were notified by email before reporting to work.

Longer-Term Response:

- **Payroll for last pay period completed** – The payroll approver returned from vacation the day after one employee death and began processing payroll before seeing the email – they called the employee’s workplace to ask why they had not clocked in the previous day.
- **Most employee tasks had been documented** and were easy to duplicate – we did find out about one task the employee had taken on without our knowledge.
- **Sympathy card provided for immediate co-workers to sign.**
- **Coverage provided for immediate co-workers to attend funerals**
- **Notified professional organization for which Employee #1 was the Secretary** – but only a week or two after their passing.

Successes:

- **Communication between members of the supervisory chain** who worked different shifts in multiple buildings.
- **Previous familiarity with family members of those deceased**, which facilitated communication.
- **Enabling former co-workers to express their sense of loss** by distributing sympathy cards to be signed and sent to the family of the deceased employee, and by adjusting schedules to ensure that employees who worked most closely with the deceased could attend a memorial service.

Areas for Improvement

- Integrate into each supervisor’s initial training and orientation **the procedures for indicating the death of an employee** in payroll systems and any other ways needed for human resources units in your institution
- When announcing a death, **select a listserv that will reach all those in the library system with whom the employee had worked.** This should include multiple branches, and multiple types of employees (e.g., librarians, staff, graduate assistants and student employees).
- Keep up-to-date records of **offices and committee appointments held in professional organizations**, so that they can be notified.
- Verify that persons in the **supervisory chain and those with responsibility in payroll processing** have received any communication regarding the employee’s death.
- **Have all employees regularly review documentation of workflow within their unit**, noting inaccuracies, changes, or tasks not included in the existing version of the documentation.

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